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Marvin A. Sweeney, King Josiah of Judah: the Lost Messiah of Israel

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel by Marvin A. Sweeney

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currency both as an important synthetic study and—because it incorporates the most recent bibliography on secondary literature and archaeological and epigraphic discoveries—as something of a reference on those developments.

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King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel. By MARVIN A. SWEENEY. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pp. xvi + 350. \$60.

Sweeney's volume joins the deluge of monographs and periodical articles devoted in the past 40 years or so to Josiah of Judah, a biblical monarch who played a distinctly minor role in Jewish and Christian biblical exegesis before the work of Julius Wellhausen and the nineteenth-century biblical archaeology movement thrust this king into the limelight. The methodological intent and structure of the book is gratifyingly clear: by combining archaeological evidence for the "age of Josiah" together with a minute redaction-critical analysis of the so-called Deuteronomistic History, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Nahum, Hosea, Amos, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk, and by subjecting the biblical texts to a rhetorical close reading, the figure of Josiah and his religio-political aspirations may be extricated, more or less reliably, from the matrix of the past. This Sweeney does in two parts, "The Deuteronomistic History" (pp. 21–177) and "Prophetic Literature and Josiah's Reign" (pp. 179–313), with a final conclusion chapter (pp. 315–23). In the former, the author works outwards, as it were, from the central narratives of the reign, beginning with the conclusion of 2 Kings and the story of Josiah, then progressing backwards in time through the reigns of Manasseh, Hezekiah, the Northern Kingdom (1 Kings 12–2 Kings 17), Solomon, David, Saul, Judges, Joshua, and Deuteronomy. In part 2, Sweeney weighs the evidence for a Josianic redaction in the aforementioned prophetic books. Both sections conclude with extremely clear summaries, just as the volume begins with a lucid introduction that

accurately summarizes the historical and exegetical issues, as the author construes them, and then lays out the program of the book and its global conclusions.

Prospective readers of *King Josiah of Judah* who might hungrily suppose that they are getting a monograph-length historical study in the format of the *Cambridge Ancient History* series are doomed to famine. Sweeney's work comprises a closely argued redaction-critical study of the Deuteronomistic History and several prophetic texts, written largely in dialogue with leading representatives of the East Coast "American school" who share his assumptions concerning the historical reliability of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the conviction that redaction-critical methods yield historically transparent insights analogous to the stratigraphic reconstruction of a scientifically controlled archaeological excavation. Sweeney gets off to a promising start in his introduction. After giving us a synopsis of the old chestnut that *lammelek* jar handles and an ostrakon prove that the historical Josiah succeeded in re-establishing the boundaries of the Davidic Empire before his untimely death at the hands of Pharaoh, Sweeney deftly disposes of this "evidence" and other supposed indices of Josianic territorial expansion, drawing the creditable conclusion that, "If any reform program took place at all, it must have been very limited in scope and in success" (p. 7).

Following this auspicious beginning, however, we are returned to a familiar world in which Josiah *ex hypothesi* attempted to restore "the full neo-Davidic empire" (p. 7), and "scholars accept the historical reality of Josiah's reign and reform program as presented in the DtrH [Deuteronomistic History]" (p. 5 and *passim*). While Sweeney does evince some awareness of the troubling historical enigmas of this king, the harder questions go unasked and unanswered. Examples: Sweeney believes that Josiah pursued a pro-Babylonian, anti-Assyrian foreign policy like that of his great-grandfather Hezekiah, a notion largely based on the assumption that a "power vacuum" prevailed in the Southern Levant following the implosion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire at the death of Assurbanipal, a vacuum that the ambitious Judahite king sought to fill. There is no evidence for such a vacuum, pro or con; it is entirely possible

that the Assyrians in their decline passed the administrative authority over these territories to the rulers of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty, in which case Josiah was a nominal Assyrian and *de facto* Egyptian vassal for his entire reign. Pace Sweeney, the political implications of the decline of Assyria at Assurbanipal's death, while clear for us today in historical hindsight, were probably fraught with uncertainty for the court of Josiah together with most of Western Asia (pp. 254–55). And the biblical Josiah is credited with destroying a variety of divine images, slaughtering priests, and decommissioning cultic installations. By comparison, the Sargonid kings of Assyria never claimed in their royal inscriptions to have slain priests, and it was only in the instance of the epic destruction of national temples—the Urtian temple of Ḫaldi by Sargon, the temples of Babylon by Sennacherib, and the temples of Susa by Assurbanipal—that the Assyrian kings dared to boast of temple and cult-image demolition, deeds that in fact must have happened regularly in the course of the fiery conquest of major urban centers. Was Josiah more immune to the charge of sacrilege than the Assyrian monarchs in the eyes of his contemporaries, or do these biblical claims perhaps come from a world removed from the age when Davidic kings ruled over Judah? And what kind of empire was the historic Josiah attempting to create by killing priests and pulling down altars? Are not such actions part of the repertoire employed by enemies bent on sabotage and reprisal rather than consolidating political control? Sweeney frames his study with a received portrait of the reformer-king Josiah, would-be restorer of a Davidic Empire, a recapitulation of the DtrH's cult apologetics that fails to ignite conviction in the absence of sustained comparative historiography and a rational appraisal of King Josiah's behavior.

Sweeney's primary task in *King Josiah of Judah* appears to be the isolation of redactional strata within the biblical narrative. His analysis builds on the work of F. M. Cross and his disciples, who posit the existence of "a Josianic edition of the DtrH that was designed to present King Josiah's reign and reform as the culmination of Israel's history in the reunification of the people of Israel around the Jerusalem Temple as

YHWH's central sanctuary and the house of David as YHWH's designated dynasty" (p. 10). To be sure, Sweeney is his own man and departs from the interpretations of Cross at a number of points, for instance, in his assessment of the significance of Jeroboam I for the Josianic edition (pp. 86–92). In keeping with earlier studies by other scholars, he finds evidence of extensive Josianic redactional activity in various prophetic texts. The criteria used to identify the redactional hands are, to say the least, broad: cult centralization; a desire to restore a Davidic dynasty; reunification of the divided houses of Israel and Judah; exile and its aftermath; joint references to Assyria, Egypt, and/or Cush; and negative evaluations of Judahite kings that imply a positive evaluation of Josiah. The temptation to indulge in circular argumentation or fractured syllogistic logic (the book of Nahum deals triumphantly with the fall of Nineveh and the deliverance of Judah; Josiah's reign encompassed the period of the decline of Assyria and was concerned with Assyria and the restoration of Judah; therefore, Nahum reflects Josianic interest in the fall of Nineveh [pp. 198–207]) prove irresistible.

A colleague of mine, Lowell K. Handy, who has published much on Josiah that Sweeney might profit by (who by the way is never cited in the bibliography of *King Josiah of Judah*), once delivered a conference lecture entitled "The Busy Scribes of Josiah's Court." In it, Handy culled biblical studies publications for attributions of biblical texts to Josiah and paraded portions of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, First Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, the Korah Psalms, and Ruth as claimants to Josianic authorship. The reasons for their scholarly attribution to Josiah, apart from explicit reference to the king (Josiah's reconstruction of the Davidic Empire, the collapse of the Assyrian Empire, the great monotheistic/single temple cultic reform, and the finding/composing/editing of Deuteronomy) are either historically dubious, too general to be laid exclusively at the feet of Josiah's busy scribes, or both. I would be happier with Sweeney's inclusive redaction-critical efforts had he mounted a spirited defense against the critiques of Handy and many other scholars who sharply differ with

our author's ascription and dating of biblical texts. Instead, a reluctance to grapple with or even cite dissenting opinions by a respectable cadre of specialists undermines the credibility of the redaction-criticism that characterizes this work.

Sweeney comes into his own as a literary critic, for he has an ear for the music of these ancient texts and is unafraid to challenge earlier readings. For instance, he makes a convincing case that the image of the Assyrian Empire as a political agent in DtrH ends with the destruction of Sennacherib's army and the Assyrian king's own ignominious death in the reign of Hezekiah (pp. 53–54, 62, 72, 254). By removing Assyrian entanglements from the reigns of Manasseh and Josiah, the biblical authors freed them to behave at once more appallingly evil and more steadfastly pious than had they been represented as Assyrian or Egyptian vassals, cogs whirring in the imperial machinery. While this observation is not original, it does justice to the literary economy of 2 Kings, nimbly avoiding the temptation to read sinister Assyrian cultic introductions into the religious affairs of these kings simply because we "know" that abandonedly wicked Manasseh and Ahaz could not have resisted them and irreproachably good Josiah must have demolished them. Other evidences of Sweeney's sensitivity to the message of the text include his reluctance to construe the structure of the central section of the Deuteronomy legal instruction as an extended meditation on the decalogue (pp. 144–45); other instructive examples could be cited.

The readership for this book is biblical specialists who approach the study of the Hebrew Scriptures with methodological expectations similar to Sweeney's and the larger pool of scholars who are willing to navigate the redaction-critical undercroft in order to glean the hidden gems of his literary insights. I cannot in good conscience recommend it as a survey of current scholarship and approaches to the study of Josiah because too many important voices and perspectives are missing.

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Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy. By J. GARY MILLAR. New Studies in Biblical Theology. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998. Pp. 216. \$24 (paperback).

Now Choose Life, a revision of an Oxford University D.Phil. thesis supervised by John Barton, was published in a series aimed at evangelical scholars and clergy. The work comprises six chapters: "Introduction: Old Testament Ethics and Deuteronomy" (pp. 17–40), chap. 1: "Ethics and Covenant" (pp. 41–66), chap. 2: "Ethics and Journey" (pp. 67–98), chap. 3: "Ethics and Law" (pp. 99–146), chap. 4: "Ethics and the Nations" (pp. 147–60), and chap. 5: "Ethics and Human Nature" (pp. 161–80). The chapters move thematically through Deuteronomy in canonical order, so, for instance, chap. 2 canvasses Deuteronomy 1–3, 4, 5–11, and 27–34. The book concludes with a brief afterword, bibliography, and author and scripture indexes.

The evangelical focus of this volume presupposes the acceptance of a specific Protestant hermeneutic of Deuteronomy as a guide to contemporary ethical praxis. As such, the worldview of the biblical authors, as refracted through the author's religious tradition, is that espoused by Millar. The vast scholarly corpus of Thomistic moral theology figures nowhere in its pages. *Now Choose Life* does not speak the language of professional ethics, and those yearning for a rigorous discussion of modern philosophical ethics and Deuteronomy must look elsewhere. Similarly, liberation, feminist, black, and other emancipatory theologies born in the turbulent twentieth century, with their characteristic visions of constructive and demonic life choices, have no place in this text. I believe it is safe to say that the ethical conclusions drawn by this author would not be those of mainstream Orthodox Jewish scholarship, and certainly not the waning voice of the liberal Christian tradition. Granted these exclusions, the introduction succeeds as a competent survey of twentieth-century scholarship on Deuteronomy and ethics: Johannes Hempel (1964), Walther Eichrodt (1964), John Barton (1978, 1983, 1996), Walther Kaiser (1983), Brevard Childs (1985, 1992), Christopher H. Wright (1983), and Waldemar Janzen (1994).

Millar's ultimate goal of providing a roadmap of Deuteronomical ethics leads him to concentrate